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Millers Try to Define Selves With Voters

Rivals for Senate Seat Stake Out Turf

By Philip Rucker
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 Thursday, August 10, 2006; T03

There was a collision of Millers on the campaign trail last weekend as state Senate President Thomas V. Mike Miller Jr. bumped into Ron Miller, the former Bush administration official who is trying to unseat Maryland's veteran State House leader in his Prince George's-Calvert district.

Republican Ron Miller, wearing a white T-shirt emblazoned with his campaign logo, gave his pitch to prospective voters Saturday at the African American Heritage Day festival at the National Colonial Farm in Accokeek. As the challenger was explaining why they should vote for him, the entrenched incumbent came up behind him.

The pair shook hands. Then Mike Miller (D) introduced his opponent to two Prince George's state delegates visiting the festival with him: "This is Ron Miller," Mike Miller told Dels. James E. Proctor Jr. and Joseph F. Vallario Jr., both Democrats.

If the Accokeek farm is anyone's turf, it's Mike Miller's. The lawmaker's family once owned the former tobacco farm at the end of Bryan Point Road along the Potomac River across from Mount Vernon, and the incumbent Miller sits on the board of directors of the Accokeek Foundation, which runs the farm.

Ron Miller, 44, a technology consultant who served in the Federal Emergency Management Agency and in the White House under President Bush, is running against a Maryland political institution. Mike Miller, 63, has served more than 31 years in the Senate and has been its president since 1987. Gov. Robert L. Ehrlich Jr. (R) recruited Ron Miller to challenge the Senate leader, persuading him to drop out of his race against U.S. Rep. Steny H. Hoyer (D), the House minority whip, a few days before the filing deadline.

Ron Miller said he hopes to temper the partisan atmosphere in Annapolis, for which he blames Mike Miller.

"Friends, the days of the backroom politician with no regard for his district are over," Ron Miller said in remarks prepared for the start of his campaign last month at a school in Clinton, where he was joined by Ehrlich. "It's not his government. It's ours, and we're here to take it back."

Last month, after Ron Miller entered the race, Mike Miller said he is "totally responsive" to the problems and needs of his constituency.

"Honestly, I've served the area for many years," Mike Miller said. "I know the people, I know the problems and needs of the people, and I hope they respond."

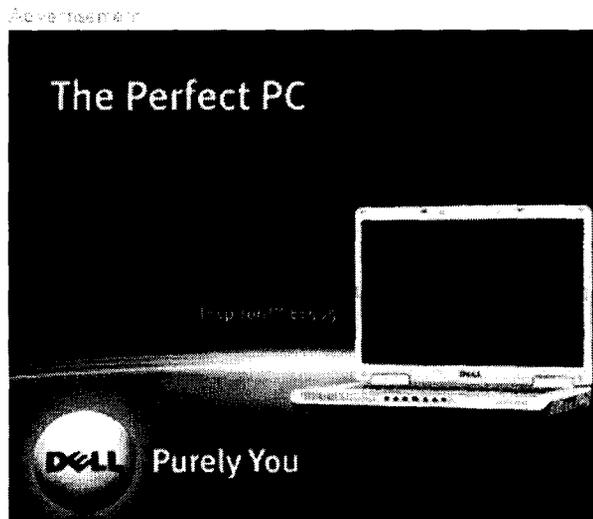
State Democrats do not believe that Ron Miller has the name recognition, finances or experience to make the race seriously competitive. But his challenge forces Mike Miller, one of the state's most powerful fundraisers, to spend on his reelection campaign funds that he otherwise would have been able to use to help elect other Democrats in Maryland.

Despite the heated rhetoric from both sides of the campaign, it was a clubby scene Saturday afternoon in southern Prince George's under a searing sun shaded by trees.

"If you've done this a long time, you're used to it. But I must admit, since I'm a newcomer, it's a bit strange. But I just smile, and I'm polite," Ron Miller said of the run-in with Mike Miller.

Then Ron Miller reflected on the casual fraternity that sometimes develops between political enemies: "It's kind of a throwback to the old days when people slugged it out on the floor of Congress and [would] go across the street . . . together."

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